

Franco "Bifo" Berardi  
**The Message of Francis**

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*“Omnia videre, multa dissimulare, pauca corrigere.”*

In *Habemus papam* (the best movie by this director, in my opinion), Nanni Moretti portrays the impotence of human beings facing the immensity of historical suffering. God is nowhere in the movie, and the new elected Pope, played by Michel Piccoli, feels unable to express with words the unimaginable chaos of reality in the absence of God.

Moretti’s genius in this case foretold a drama that actually unfolded in the Church of Rome just a few months after the release of the film.

In February 2013, Joseph Ratzinger, the German pope who asserted the unquestionable superiority of truth against any relativism, decided to resign, declaring his physical and spiritual feebleness. This was an act of unprecedented courage and humility that we should interpret in philosophical terms as an acknowledgment of the political impotence of ethical reason.

I’m not a theologian and I don’t pretend to deeply understand the meaning and intentions behind such an enormous act. However, from the point of view of secular philosophy, I claim that the resignation of Ratzinger, or Pope Benedict XVI, marked the failure of the historical attempt to master and subdue the unchained forces of evil materialized by the animal instincts of global capitalism. Overwhelmed by his own weakness, Benedict fell silent and lowered his head. Admitting his impotence was in my view the highest sign of his fortitude.

Then something new happened. In a time when sectarian violence, conservative arrogance, and economic greed have taken the upper hand almost everywhere, a man appeared in the window of Saint Peter’s Basilica and hailed the crowds of the world simply saying: “good evening.”

I’m not a believer, and my atheism makes it difficult for me to accept the idea that the Holy Spirit enlightened the high clergy who met in the papal conclave in the days of March 2013. However, human wisdom led them to elect a new pope, Francis, who seems to stand – alone – against ethnic violence, political oppression, and economic exploitation.

I cannot pretend to adequately interpret the theological implications of Pope Francis’s preaching, nor do I intend to. Nevertheless, I want to understand the philosophical implications of his acts and his words from a historical perspective. On April 11, 2015, Francis released his *Misericordiae Vultus* to inaugurate a Holy Year of Mercy, and the document is an explicit redefinition of the relation between truth and compassion, insisting upon the superiority

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Two of the doves released during prayers at the Vatican were attacked by a crow and a seagull, which attempted to devour the two, January 27, 2013.

of compassion over truth.<sup>1</sup> We may replace the word “compassion” with the word “empathy,” and also with the word “solidarity.”

In an interview with Father Antonio Spadaro published by *La Civiltà Cattolica*, the Pope, who, in his own words, came from the end of the world, declares that the Church should be seen as a military field hospital:

What the Church needs more today is the ability to heal the wounds, and to warm the heart of the believers, the proximity. I see the Church as a military field hospital. It's useless to ask a seriously wounded person if he has cholesterol. His wounds have to be healed. Then we'll speak about other things. Healing wounds is our mission ... and we must start from below.

What is striking in these words is the Pope's intellectual courage to abandon the discourse of hope. In doing so, he interprets the prevailing sentiment of our time: the hopeless perception of the future. However, he translates this hopelessness in terms of mercy, compassion, and friendship.

In Christian parlance, without faith, hope is impossible. And faith seems to be over, since communism, democracy, and progressive dialectics crumbled at the end of the last century. Only capitalism survives. But faith in capitalism has collapsed as well, during the years of financial arrogance and precarious work. In the 1990s capitalism was proclaimed to be the universal and ultimate model of social life, conquering the mind of many deficient left-wing intellectuals. Now, only twenty years later, capitalism has lost almost all of its credibility and is ruling as an unstoppable automatic machine. It is no longer winning by the force of consent; it is just subjugating souls and bodies by force.

So faith is over.

I'm not a believer; I trust in no god and no ideology, so I don't think that the end of faith is a bad thing. On the contrary, I think that when we are freed from faith we can grasp the real tendency of the time, and we can seize the most interesting opportunities that the tendency brings about.

But in order to seize the possible and to actualize it, we need friendship, solidarity, happiness, and pleasure in the relations among bodies. This is what we lack today. Not hope, not faith, but friendship is lacking. This is why mankind is teetering on the abyss of war and suicide.

My interpretation of the words of Francis may be read as blasphemous, but not incongruous with their intended meaning: God is

not here to take care of our wars, pollution, or the exploitation and precariousness of work. He is possibly busy with something more urgent – who knows. Anyway, we have to do without his help.

Consequently, we must abandon hope: the world machine is ungovernable, and human will is impotent. Only friendship is left. This is how I understand Francis's words.

In a fascinating text titled “Pope Franciscus Under a Bright Red Star,” Federico Campagna compares the actions of the pope elected in 2013 with the actions of the pope elected in 1503: Julius II, the “‘Pope dressed in armour,’ the warrior Pontifex who had spent his life fighting to ‘push back the barbarians.’”<sup>2</sup>

Campagna proposes a political interpretation of the message of Francis, the Pope who summons antiglobalization and social activists, aiming to become the reference point of that part of the world population that has no more political representation after the fall of the Communist Revolution.

As for me, I do not deny that the Francis's preaching has political intentions and political effects, but I don't think this is the most important message of the man. The most important, in my humble opinion, is the suggestion that Christ did not come to Earth to impose justice, but to preach friendship and compassion – like Siddhartha Gautama, by the way, who similarly spoke of Great Compassion as the only way to harmonize the singularity of existence and the Cosmic Game.

On September 10, 1978, a Pope named Albino Luciani declared that “God is more a mother than a father.” He died only a few weeks after this scandalous affirmation.

By saying that Christ is merciful love more than the severity of truth, Pope Francis is rephrasing Luciani's concept. With his emphasis on mercy, he suggests God's motherly attention to the frailty of the human creature, in opposition to a fatherly obsession with the Law.

Obviously, we must read this emphasis in political terms: Christians are murdered in many countries because of their religious belonging. But Francis is not calling for a Crusade. On the contrary, he has repeatedly blamed Western powers for their aggressive behavior against Islam.

We can read his emphasis on mercy in the context of financial violence and European austerity that is destroying the life and future of the Greek people – and not only theirs. We can also read the emphasis on mercy in relation to the selfishness of European countries who refuse to accept migrants who are fleeing countries like Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan, countries pushed into an abyss by the infinite

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Western wars.

As I do not expect redemption in my afterlife, I think that despair is the only appropriate intellectual stance in this time. But I also think that despair and joy are not irreconcilable, as despair is the mood of the intellectual mind, while joy is the mood of the embodied mind. Friendship is the force that transforms despair into joy. This is the lesson that I learn from the man who came from the end of the world.

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*Misericordiae Vultus*, Pope Francis, April 11, 2015, see [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_letters/documents/papa-francesco\\_bolla\\_20150411\\_misericordiae-vultus.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_letters/documents/papa-francesco_bolla_20150411_misericordiae-vultus.html)

2

“Pope Franciscus Under a Bright Red Star,” *The White Review* 13 (March 2015), see <http://www.thewhitereview.org/features/pope-franciscus-under-a-bright-red-star/>

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